

## **The Protection of the Church** **Acts 4:32-5:16**

Today we're going to talk about one of the most unpopular things in the church and that's the issue of church discipline. What kinds of thoughts come to your mind when you think about "church discipline"? If I were to guess, I would think that for most people it would be negative. Church discipline reminds us of an authoritarian, state-controlled church of the past where the church would control people to keep them in line and punish those who veered off course. We might use words like strict, cold, hard, and severe to describe it.

Church discipline does not go over well in our permissive culture today. People see it as a barbaric thing. The mentality I have often seen is, "What I do in my life, when I'm not at church is none of your business. That's between me and God." So for church leadership to confront a member because of obvious ongoing sin in their life outside the church is seen as unusually intrusive, judgmental, and condemning. Churches are supposed to be places of love and tolerance where sinners are welcomed with open arms. They have no right to confront their members, much less punish them or kick them out for bad behavior.

This morning we are going to look at a very difficult story to fully understand, and it's not a story of church discipline – I want to be clear on that – it's a story of divine judgement. But I believe it ties in with church discipline and gives us the foundation of what it is and why it's so important to God and to the church. My hope is that we will come away with a different view of church discipline and a vision for why we should be a church that stands firm for righteousness and does not turn a blind eye to unrepentant sin in our midst.

We left off last week after the story about how the young church in Jerusalem responded to serious threats and opposition. They joined together for prayer and support and they were filled with the Spirit. In his power, they continued to speak the word of the Lord with boldness. They enjoyed a wonderful season of growth and grace after that and that's where we're going to pick up this morning.

Read Acts 4:32-37.

*<sup>32</sup> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles were giving their*

*testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. <sup>36</sup> Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, <sup>37</sup> sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

Wonderful things were happening in this church in spite of the opposition from their government. God was blessing it, people were in harmony with one another, people were generous and sharing with those in need. And Luke makes it a point to write about one example in particular – a wonderful Christian man named Barnabas who we read about later on as a missionary with Paul. This is the first time we see Barnabas in the Bible and what we see is that he was fully devoted to Christ and the life of the church. He sold a piece of property so that he could bring the money to the apostles, so they could use it to share with those who were in need. That's a powerful example. With people like Barnabas, the church was healthy and flourishing.

But a shocking turn of events was about to take place. Something that stunned everyone in this new church community. Nothing like this had ever happened before and it really rocked their world.

Read Acts 5:1-11.

*But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup> and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup> But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup> The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.*

*<sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." <sup>9</sup> But Peter said to her, "How is it that you*

*have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”*

*<sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.*

This was a shocking event. Everything up to this point in the book of Acts was all positive about the church. The only problems they had were the people on the outside – the Jewish religious leaders who wanted them to cease and desist. They were their greatest threat. But now you have a major problem within the church community itself.

This is a difficult story to interpret and how we are supposed to understand what happened is up for debate. I think we often read this story and think, “Whoa, that was crazy.” But we don’t give it much thought or ask some tough questions. That Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of sin is obvious. The implication is that they saw or heard what Barnabas did, which awakened a covetous desire within them to be the ones in the spotlight and receive the attention and appreciation that he did. So they came up with a plan to do the same thing he did, only they would secretly keep some of the money for themselves so they could have both the money and the attention. They acted in a way that showed no consideration of God, which suggests that they weren’t truly Christians – they were false believers that had become part of this church. And they did what a false believer would do.

But why did they die because of it? And more importantly, why did they die when there would be so many people who would do similar, but far worse things and be allowed to live? Some say they died from the shock of being found out – “God didn’t kill them, they died from shock...” I don’t think so. The context of the story leads you to conclude that God ended their lives. God killed them. Again, I will be tying this into the issue of church discipline, but this is not a case of church discipline, it never got to that point. Church discipline doesn’t involve killing people! This is divine judgment. So why did God kill them and not kill so many deceptive, conniving false-believers who would become part of the church after them?

This is my best attempt at answering that question. It wasn’t because they were guilty, it wasn’t because of their particular sin, it wasn’t because they were false-

believers in the church. It was because they were the first. They were the first major threat to the unity, health and reputation of this church. Up to this point you don't read about any other cases of blatant, intentional sin in the church. Every report up to this time is very positive – unity, harmony, generosity, obedience, grace, power, awe, growth... the church is really healthy and flourishing. But then comes Ananias and Sapphira. Not sure at what point they joined or why they did, they certainly would have seen the signs and wonders and healings done by the apostles – the apostles were kind of like celebrities among the church people and this married couple decided to jump on the bandwagon.

They appear to be very worldly minded – controlled by the desires of the flesh with no fear or consideration of God, no reservation about trying to get the spotlight on them through lies and deceit. So, like many people have done since then, they jumped on the bandwagon of an exciting movement and community. And then they saw Barnabas and what he did and the recognition he got from the apostles. And Satan filled their hearts with envy – they wanted what he got. They had land too, they could sell a piece of it, keep some money for themselves and bring the rest to the apostles, making it look like they brought it all. No one would ever know.

What they didn't realize is that God knew. He was watching their every move, he knew every thought and motive of their hearts. He saw the deceptive path they were on and he saw the threat they would be to his beloved church. If such people were allowed to remain in the church, they would be like poison – influencing the health of the whole body. So to demonstrate to the church both then and for generations to come, how deadly it was to allow such people to remain as part of the church and how important it was that his church stand against sin and pursue righteousness, he sent a very clear message. People like Ananias and Sapphira could not be tolerated. They had to go. They had to be cut off from the community. They were already cut off and condemned in the sight of God, and for the sake of the protection of the church they had to go. Removing them from the church was merely an outward confirmation of what was already true.

So when Ananias and Sapphira came to the apostles that day he sent this message loud and clear by ending their lives. He ended their lives to protect his beloved church and I believe to show the church how important church discipline is. It's not about meddling in other people's business. It's about protecting the

church. The greatest danger to the church is not the opposition we face on the outside; it's the corruption that spreads on the inside. Later on in the book of Acts, the apostle Paul gives this warning to the church leaders in Ephesus: *"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;<sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them"* (Acts 20:29-30). The book of Jude was written because a church was tolerating these kinds of people. Jude describes them like this: *"<sup>4</sup>For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ...<sup>12</sup> These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted;<sup>13</sup> wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever"* (Jude 1:4, 12-16).

So the way I understand the story in Acts is that God's actions against Ananias and Sapphira set the stage for the serious matter of church discipline for the future of the church. Tolerating unrepentant, false believers who for some reason want to stay and have an influence on the church is a very serious problem. It's a major threat to the church that has to be taken seriously. And you see that it is as you read throughout the NT. The apostles and Jesus himself were very strong on this matter. You must not tolerate wickedness in the church or the church will fall apart from the inside out.

Church discipline is looked at as such a bad thing in our world today – a disgusting thing that many think goes directly against what a church should be – loving and accepting of everybody and not bothering people about their sin because that's none of the church's business. And many churches shy away from it because of the negative connotations and the fear that church discipline will ruin the church and church growth. Church discipline can seem like a PR nightmare. But PR isn't what builds God's church. God builds his church. And where church discipline is taken seriously, God will build his church.

You would think that after two people got caught trying to deceive the disciples and died for it that it would be the beginning of the end for that church. Who would want to be a part of that? But it's interesting to see what happened.

Read Acts 5:12-16

<sup>12</sup> Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. <sup>13</sup> None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. <sup>14</sup> And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, <sup>15</sup> so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. <sup>16</sup> The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

The shocking deaths of Ananias and Sapphira did cause widespread fear among the people, but it also brought a solemn seriousness to who the church was and what they were doing. They weren't a popular bandwagon to jump on board. They were a people committed to the Messiah and his cause, and though the people were afraid because of what happened, they also had a high esteem for the people in the church. And the church didn't die. In fact, Luke says that more than ever people were added to the Lord.

As we seek God's vision for our church, what I see from this story today is that God's desire is that we will be a church that takes our calling and purpose seriously – so seriously that we will continue to stand for righteousness in a world that is becoming more and more corrupt, and not allow the threat of ongoing unrepentant sin to go unchecked in our church family. I want to be clear – all of us who are here this morning struggle with certain areas of sin, and we will until the day we die. But there's a big difference between a person who struggles with sin and has the desire to beat it and one who tolerates sin and is content to live in it and is spreading that attitude to others. We don't condemn people for struggling with sin, we welcome them alongside us all who are in exactly the same boat.

But when we do become aware of church members who are part of our church family, who willfully disregard sin in their lives and unreservedly continue in it with no desire for repentance and even defends their actions, we have to take action. We apply the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 that tells us to go to that person and share our concern. If they listen, great, we have won them over. But if they don't we then go with one or two others who can confirm our concern. And if they don't listen even then, we take it to the church – which is most often the church leadership, and the elders get involved. In some cases we've had to remove people from membership and the church. We do it slowly and carefully,

giving ample time for the Holy Spirit to work and for people to repent, but if they do not, we have to remove them from our church. There is too much at stake to try to ignore the issue.